

Georgia WILD Newsletter: January– February 2008

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Birding is busy in Georgia this winter

SOCIAL CIRCLE, Ga. (Jan. 3, 2008) -- Amateur and expert birders alike are polishing up their binoculars and putting on warm jackets to prepare for this winter's birding survey season. Georgians are invited to take part in several of these birding extravaganzas across the state. Participation is simple and free!

What will this winter bring your bird feeder? Participants in Project FeederWatch (<http://feederwatch.org/>) survey birds that visit their feeders from the second Saturday of November through early April. You can help scientists monitor changes in Georgia's bird populations by tracking birds at feeders in backyards, nature centers, community areas and many other bird-feeding locales across the state.

For those bird enthusiasts with busy schedules this winter, the Great Backyard Bird Count (<http://gbbc.birdcount.org/>) is for you! It takes as little as 15 minutes. It's free, fun and easy and it helps the birds. This annual event engages bird watchers of all ages to count birds anywhere for as little or as long as they wish Feb. 15-18. Reporting your count is also fast and simple just fill out an online checklist at the Great Backyard Bird Count Web site (<http://www.birdsource.org/gbbc/>).

Young birders across Georgia are gearing up for the annual [Youth Birding Competition](#), a 24-hour bird-a-thon held May 2-3 at Charlie Elliott Wildlife Center.

Participation is *free* and open to teams ranging in age from kindergarten to high school. To help participants learn the birds of Georgia, contest organizers will pair pre-registered teams with experienced birding mentors to take part in birding programs, workshops and other bird-related events. By organizing and registering youth teams now, this free pre-competition

program will help participants develop the knowledge needed to make the competition a success. The registration deadline is March 31.

Nongame work also aids other wildlife

SOCIAL CIRCLE, Ga. (Jan. 3, 2008) -- Jason Wisniewski hopes to spend 40 days hunting deer and other game this season. In late November, however, the wildlife biologist with the Wildlife Resources Division's Nongame Conservation Section was hunting for endangered mussels on Florida's Apalachicola River, part of a federal survey spurred by drought and dropping lake levels upstream in Georgia.

Wisniewski, a specialist in freshwater mussels, sees no disconnect between his favored recreation and his beloved occupation. Mussels, which filter water and provide food for other species, are part of a foundation of life encompassing all creatures and habitats. "They're all really linked together," he said.

The linkage is evident in Georgia, where projects led by the Nongame Conservation Section, which is charged with conserving nongame species as diverse as bald eagles and pitcherplants, also benefit game animals, their habitats and the sportsmen who pursue them. The section receives no general revenues from the state, depending instead on donations, grants and fund-raisers such as wildlife license plate sales. But ripples from the work spread wide.

Consider that:

- Money from the Nongame Wildlife Conservation Fund and grants obtained by nongame staff have helped the Georgia Department of Natural Resources acquire more than 34,000 acres since 2002, all open to hunting and, where applicable, fishing. Another \$2 million-plus is earmarked as partial payment for 3,900 acres of the Silver Lake Tract at Lake Seminole Wildlife Management Area and the 4,162-acre Fort Barrington Tract at Townsend WMA in McIntosh County. A 20,000-acre, \$35 million Georgia Land Conservation Program package announced by Gov. Sonny Perdue in December bundled those tracts with a 6,900-acre addition to Paulding Forest WMA.
- Habitat management such as prescribed burning directly benefits game species like northern bobwhite quail, white-tailed deer and wild turkey. Also, conservation research spearheaded by Wildlife Resources' diadromous fish coordinator bolsters management of striped bass.
- Six regional education centers teach some 50,000 Georgia children a year about wildlife, natural habitats and stewardship, topics that cross game-nongame boundaries.
- Cash raised for the Nongame Wildlife Conservation Fund is only part of the picture. Nongame Conservation Chief Mike Harris said employees also pull down an impressive amount of competitive grants and other funds. The long list of projects funded includes land acquisition, longleaf pine restoration on state property and work involving Alabama shad, an important forage for some gamefish.

"Over the last five years, every \$1 of Nongame Conservation money spent for conservation was matched with \$1.90 from federal grants and other sources," Harris said.

Benefits flow both ways, with Game Management and Fisheries sections' projects also boosting some nongame species.

And underlying all is an understanding that sizing up wildlife management and conservation is best done with a wide-angle lens.

Many sportsmen appreciate the contribution of nongame wildlife to their enjoyment of the outdoors, Harris said. For example, coastal anglers seeking king mackerel, redfish and tarpon rely on feeding brown pelicans and royal terns to find schools of pogies, or Atlantic menhaden, a popular baitfish.

"The presence of nongame wildlife enriches the experience for everyone," Harris said.

Wisniewski would agree. His deer-stand highlights this season include seeing the biggest buck of his life and spotting his first fisher, a rare member of the weasel family making a comeback in Pennsylvania, where Wisniewski was hunting.

The fisher, he said, "was by far the highlight of my whole trip."

Study documents secretive bats, favored habitats

SOCIAL CIRCLE, Ga. (Jan. 3, 2008) -- A student's summer spent slogging through Georgia swamps with a flashlight in hand has shed light on the range and favored shelter of a most secretive bat.

Matt Clement, a graduate student in the Warnell School of Forestry and Natural Resources at the University of Georgia, wanted to find at least 30 Rafinesque's big-eared bats, a number approximately equal to the previously documented records of the species in Georgia. He also hoped to characterize the bats' roosting habitat.

But Clement's systematic probing along river bottoms in three management areas turned up about 565 of these rare mammals with rabbit-like ears. The research initiated by Warnell faculty member Dr. Steven Castleberry and funded by the Georgia Wildlife Resources Division and UGA also identified large, hollow water tupelo trees as key roost sites. Such trees have become relatively scarce yet can still be found in some bottomlands inaccessible to logging. Clement said the findings "greatly expand the known distribution of Rafinesque's big-eared bats in Georgia and deeply refine our understanding of their habitat preferences."

The insight can help manage an under-studied species rated as a high priority in the state's conservation roadmap, the Wildlife Action Plan, according to Jim Ozier of the WRD Nongame Conservation Section.

"Too often, the value of big, old trees that develop large cavities is overlooked," said Ozier, a Nongame Conservation program manager. "Many habitat types and components can be managed relatively easily. However, nothing but time can produce these mature forests." Rafinesque's big-eared bats range throughout the Southeast but are considered abundant nowhere. Weighing no more than a half-ounce and measuring 3-4 inches long, they favor forests, flying insects and darkness, not emerging from roosts until evening has faded to night. Ears more than an inch long help pinpoint insects through echolocation. The bats emit high-frequency sounds that bounce off prey and other objects, then interpret the returning sounds to produce a picture of the surroundings.

Ozier said Clement's bat discoveries "confirm what we hoped and thought might be there." From May through August, Clement and a helper followed randomly picked, 500-meter transects through bottomlands marked as frequently or rarely flooded on Tuckahoe Wildlife Management Area near Sylvania, Moody Forest Natural Area near Baxley and Ocmulgee WMA near Cochran. Each Coastal Plain site is along a major river. Tuckahoe is on the Savannah River; Moody, the Altamaha; and Ocmulgee, the same-named river.

Clement checked hollow trees near the transect lines, shining a million-candle power light into the trees -- usually through ground-level openings -- and counting roosting bats. He used a hand mirror for hollows too small for his head.

He found 97 roosts with Rafinesque's big-eared bats. Two trees in Tuckahoe had more than 120 bats each. None of the roosts were in rarely flooded areas, although some radio-tagged bats flew into those areas, he said.

While still analyzing data, Clement theorizes that water tupelos dominated as roosts because they tend to grow big, hollow and in frequently flooded cypress-gum swamps, which provide the protection from logging needed to reach old age. It's the inaccessible sites that support the large hollow trees, he said.

Clement is planning more research this summer. But he is already close to the project's ultimate goal: Being able to predict where these uncommon bats with the big ears can be found.

Buying a wildlife license plate or making a donation through the Give Wildlife a Chance state income tax checkoff supports conservation of big-eared bats and other nongame species. The tax checkoff and sales of bald eagle and hummingbird tags provide vital funding for the Nongame Conservation Section, which receives no state appropriations.

Wildlife tags are available for \$25 at county tag offices, online at <http://mvd.dor.ga.gov/tags> or via mail-in registration forms. The Give Wildlife a Chance tax checkoff is line 26 of the long tax form (Form 500) or line 10 of the short form (Form 500EZ).

Power in towers for nesting kestrels

Submitted by Nongame Conservation Section wildlife biologist Phil Spivey and program manager Jim Ozier

SOCIAL CIRCLE, Ga. (Jan. 3, 2008) Try to imagine the landscape of much of Georgia 200 years ago - it was vastly different from today.

Early travelers and naturalists described scenes of extensive open forests, savannas and even rolling prairies maintained by frequent fires either ignited by lightning strikes or set by American Indians over much of the coastal plain and into parts of the piedmont. This open, grassy countryside with a low density of longleaf pines or other fire-adapted trees supported a very different range of birds than the species typically seen in most of the region today. Most likely grassland specialists including Bachman's sparrow, northern bobwhite, horned lark, bobolink, loggerhead shrike, eastern meadowlark and a handsome little falcon, the southeastern American kestrel, were all common.

Historically, the southeastern kestrel probably was evenly distributed throughout Georgia's coastal plain. It roosted and nested in hollow trees and abandoned woodpecker cavities, and preyed on lizards, mice, large insects and occasionally small birds.

In more recent times, as our native open habitat types have been lost because of conversion to agriculture, intensive silviculture, development and a lack of fire, kestrels and other grassland birds have disappeared from most of their suspected former ranges. In some instances, however, small populations have been able to persist in altered habitats, such as pastures.

Through the years, a few scattered pairs of nesting kestrels hung on in Georgia, mostly in urban areas where they made their homes in the eaves and gutters of buildings. These included migratory kestrels in the northern half of the state as well as the nonmigratory southeastern subspecies in the coastal plain. During fall and winter, influxes of migratory kestrels also have been often seen on utility lines in open agricultural areas throughout most of the state.

Recent discoveries of southeastern kestrel "concentrations" at a few locations have been encouraging to biologists interested in restoring populations of this subspecies. At Fort Gordon, near Augusta, a kestrel population has persisted by nesting in the nooks of buildings and foraging on the parade grounds and training areas. A nest box program and open-pine habitat restoration efforts are helping to increase this small population.

More recently, a couple of significant kestrel populations were discovered using hollow metal poles on wide, high-voltage transmission rights of way in southern Georgia.

With primary funding through the Nongame Conservation Section, and assistance from Georgia Power Co. and The Environmental Resources Network, recent work by Dr. John Parrish and his students at Georgia Southern University has revealed just how important these power-line rights of way are, and how they can be managed to ensure they remain suitable as kestrel nesting habitat.

Kestrel populations persisting in these artificial habitats are the largest in Georgia, and possibly even the southeast. This research has proven that adding nest boxes at these sites can be a successful management tool for maintaining nesting options as many of the original hollow transmission towers become structurally unsound and are replaced with designs that do not inherently provide such sites.

By continuing the partnership with Georgia Power, the Municipal Electric Authority of Georgia (MEAG) and other owners and managers of wide power-line rights of way, Nongame Conservation hopes to develop and implement a conservation strategy that will ensure the presence of suitable nest sites along these lines and possibly others.

Eventually, as longleaf savannas are restored to the landscape, the hope is that kestrels and many other species of native Georgia wildlife will return to their natural habitats.

Where learning wild is easy

Friday, Jan. 18, 2-4 p.m.

Adopt-A-Highway Cleanup

Give back to the community by helping to beautify CEWCs Ga. 11 stretch! Meet volunteer coordinator Linda May at the Visitors Center before heading out. Participants must sign a waiver form to volunteer. Please dress for the outdoors and bring your own gloves. Orange vests and trash bags will be provided. Call Linda May at (770) 784-3059 if you would like to pitch in!

Saturday, Jan. 26, 10 a.m.-noon

Family Nature Walk: Winter Wildlife Survival

Join Karen Hoydick, a CEWC wildlife interpretive specialist, to learn how animals and plants survive during the cold winter months. Using live animals and taxidermy mounts, she will discuss various survival strategies. Then the group will head outside and search for clues of those animals that stay busy all winter. All ages are welcome, but children must be supervised. Since space is limited, pre-registration for this *free* class is required. Please swing by the Visitors Center or call (770) 784-3059 to sign up.

Wednesday, Jan. 30, 10-11:30 a.m.

Fascinated By Birds

Birds have inspired humans for centuries. Learn more about these fascinating winged creatures by watching a half-hour Eyewitness Bird movie. Linda May, a CEWC wildlife interpretive specialist, will then share live birds of prey with the audience to emphasize some points learned during the video. All ages are welcome, but children must be supervised. Space is limited, so pre-registration for this *free* class is required. Sign up at the Visitors Center or by calling (770) 784-3059.

Wednesday, Feb. 20, 10-1:30 a.m.

Endangered Species

Why do animals go extinct, and what can we do to help threatened and endangered species today? Using live animals and props, CEWC wildlife interpretive specialist Pete Griffin will give an overview of animals in trouble and discuss ways to ensure they will be around for future generations. All ages are welcome, but children must be supervised. Since space is limited, pre-registration for this *free* class is required. Sign up at the Visitors Center or by calling (770) 784-3059.

Saturday, Feb. 23, 8:30-11 a.m.

Winter Bird Walk

Join Georgia Wildlife Resources Division expert birder Tim Keyes on a search for Georgia's wintering birds. Expect to see many species, including sparrows, ducks and birds of prey. This bird search will consist of short walks and drives between various sites within the wildlife centers boundaries. Wear shoes or boots that can get wet, bring your own binoculars and field guides, and meet in the Visitors Center parking lot bright and early! All ages are welcome, but children must be supervised. Since space is limited, pre-registration for this *free* class is required. Sign up at the Visitors Center or by calling (770) 784-3059.

[Teacher training and resources](#)

March 14-16

The Environmental Education Alliance of Georgia (EEA) Annual Conference
(www.eealliance.org) "Trends, Tricks and Traditions"

Unicoi State Park, Helen

Network with educators from across Georgia while participating in seminars and hands-on sessions on current trends, new information, research and the classic tricks in environmental

education that make it all work! Take educational field trips and enjoy an amazing auction and evening socials as you meet others in the field of environmental education that want to share their ideas and gain knowledge just like you! Cost is expected to be \$175-\$200 for full registration, which includes all meals, banquet and the social. The price does not include lodging or field trips. Registration form and conference details will be posted on the EEA Web site (www.eealliance.org).

June 23-27

4th Annual Georgia Teacher Conservation Workshop
Charlie Elliott Wildlife Center, Mansfield, GA ([here](#))

The five-day workshop "Exploring Forestry and Wildlife in Georgia," (<http://gfgrow.org/programs/georgia-tcw/>) will focus on conservation topics related to the benefits of forestry, including the cycle of growing trees, using trees for products and how trees are managed for wildlife habitat. The center will host the event with the Georgia Forestry Commission (<http://www.gfc.state.ga.us/>) and the Georgia Wildlife Resources Division (www.georgiawildlife.com). Participants will be certified in Project Learning Tree (<http://gfgrow.org/programs/georgia-project-learning-tree/>), Project WILD (/projectwild_education.aspx) and Project WET (http://www.gaprojectwet.org/gawet_index.asp) upon completion. Teachers will be able to receive 3 PLU (Professional Learning Units) after completing the workshop. Due to the workshops generous sponsors, including various forestry and wildlife organizations, all field trips, lodging, meals and teacher resource kits will be included in the \$25 registration fee. This event is open to Georgia educators of grades 5-12. Deadline to apply is April 15. For more information, contact Carla Rapp at (478) 992-8110 or carla@gfgrow.org; or Walter Lane at (770) 784-3064, walter.lane@dnr.ga.gov

[Youth wildlife education contests](#)

March 10 entry deadline

Give Wildlife a Chance Poster Contest

Whether it is in the schoolyard or the backyard, students can use their senses to explore the outdoors and discover "The Sights and Sounds of Wild Georgia!" Kindergarten through 5th grade students are invited to participate in the 18th annual Give Wildlife a Chance Poster Contest by entering artwork that depicts Georgia's nongame wildlife and native plants. What do you hear, smell and see in your area? What do the trees and soil feel like? Artwork may reflect the melodies of birds and insects, or the chirps of frogs and hoots of owls at a nearby pond. Did any of the plants make a cool sound? Turn these sights and sounds into artwork and enter the chance to showcase your talents in the 2008 Give Wildlife a Chance Poster Contest calendar! Deadline for entries is March 10.

March 31 registration deadline

Youth Birding Competition

Young birders across Georgia are gearing up for the annual Youth Birding Competition, a 24-hour bird-a-thon held at Charlie Elliott Wildlife Center on May 2-3. Participation is *free* and open to teams ranging in age from kindergarten to high school. To help participants learn the birds of Georgia, contest organizers will pair pre-registered teams with experienced birding

mentors to take part in birding programs, workshops and other bird-related events. By organizing and registering youth teams now, this free pre-competition program will help participants develop the knowledge needed to make the competition a success. The registration deadline is March 31.

March 1 entry deadline

Youth Birding Competition T-shirt Art Contest

New for 2008, the Youth Birding Competition is offering a T-shirt art contest that is open to Georgia residents in pre-K through high school. The grand-prize winning artwork will appear on the 2008 YBC T-shirt! Other participants can win Michaels gift cards to redeem for art supplies. Deadline for entries is March 1.